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**FROM JJ “BOERJONG” KOTZÉ TO HANSIE CRONJE: AFRIKANERS AND
CRICKET IN 20TH CENTURY SOUTH AFRICA - DIFFUSION AND
REPRESENTATION**

There is a lively historiography pertaining to the history of cricket in South Africa, either aimed at the popular market in the form of biographies of cricketing personalities, accounts of Test series and general overviews of the game, or in more analytical format by locating cricket within the structures of South African society. For very good reasons, given the country's volatile history, much has been made of the impact of segregation and apartheid on the game.¹ While perfectly understandable, this has perhaps had the effect of preventing a more and even spread of attention covering a wider outfield. A surprising omission, when one takes into account the crucial role of Afrikanerdom in shaping the contours of 20th century South African history, is that Afrikaners' association with and interest in the game have not been subjected to a sustained analysis.²

This essay attempts to address the shortcoming by focusing on the trajectory of Afrikaner involvement in cricket, trying to account for the initial reticence to embrace the game as enthusiastically as they did with rugby. Afrikaner interest though, grew apace during the 1960's and the conditions which facilitated such a turnabout are explored. Equally, the

intricacies of the way in which prominent cricketers from an Afrikaans background have been portrayed and represented in terms of identity politics are outlined.

Ambivalence

Cricket has long been regarded as the quintessential English game, synonymous with the British upper classes and dispersed throughout the British Empire as part of the cultural glue that helped to bond the “mother” country with the colonies and wherever the game was played it was to be closely associated with the imperial heritage and ethos. For all the physical skills and mental challenges the game demanded, it also carried with it the overtones of ritualised behaviour, at times an exaggerated sense of what was considered gentlemanly conduct and was often thinly disguised elitist snobbery.³ As cricket could be time consuming, its upper class status was at least in part link to the availability of free time, a commodity in plentiful supply to those who were not compelled to work long hours. This as well as the leisurely pace of the game caused one sceptic to dub it as a form of “organised loafing.”⁴

In the South African context, cricket was imported in the 19th century by British soldiers, imperial administrative functionaries missionaries and immigrants, who were all in their own ways part of the imperial project and instrumental in the diffusion of the game.⁵ The animosities and associations spawned by South Africa’s turbulent past meant that the very disseminators of the game were also often deemed to be adversaries of or at least at loggerheads with the local Afrikaner population which had developed divergent political and cultural orientations. Throughout the 19th and well into the 20th century Afrikaner attitudes towards British cultural forms and their carriers were carefully weighted, ambiguous and at times openly dismissive. Cricket was bound to suffer the same fate.

English speakers for their part did not view Afrikaners as natural recruits to the game. Writing shortly after the devastating Anglo–Boer War of 1899-1902 John Buchan

forcefully vented such views. “It is worth considering the Boer at sport”, he wrote, “for there he is at his worst. Without a tradition of a fair play, soured and harassed by want and disaster his sport became a matter of commerce (shooting game for profit)”. Afrikaners to him “were simply not a sporting race”.⁶ Such essentialist views are of course more revealing of the imperial mindset than Afrikaner prowess at sport.

Cricket had some appeal among Afrikaners in the 19th century Cape Colony, but while the game penetrated the interior, especially in the wake of the discovery of diamonds and gold, it held no real attraction to the Boers of the republics. Those Afrikaners who played the game in the republics, such as Pieter de Villiers and G.P. Kotzé, were mainly migrants from the Cape. During the Anglo-Boer War, the British employed their prisoner-of-war and concentration camps to transmit British culture to the Boers, and in Ceylon in 1901 was staged a celebrated game between the Boer POWs and a Colombo Colts XI, the Ceylonese champions.⁷ This event has bulked large in the writing of the history of South African cricket, mainly because it was regarded as unique to find such an event taking place during wartime, but especially because of the white/ brown dimension. While intriguing, it certainly was not evidence of a widespread Boer fondness of cricket. In the event, the bitter animosities generated by the Anglo-Boer War fuelled the general Afrikaner resentment and antipathy towards British cultural practices, among them cricket though not rugby

Nevertheless, before the war NJH Theunissen, an Afrikaner theology student from Stellenbosch University represented South Africa as a fast bowler in the second Test in Cape Town against the English during the first international series in South Africa in 1889. Although chosen for the first Test in Port Elizabeth, his university professor showed complete disdain for such secular frivolities as cricket and refused to give him time off to play.⁸ A few others followed Theunissen, most prominently JJ Kotzé, nicknamed, “Boerjong” a farmer from the Western Province who was described as a “Boer who preferred cricket to war”.⁹ As

a fast bowler he “hated being punished by the batsman” but was considered a poor batsman and a clumsy fielder.¹⁰ He played in England while the war was still in progress and visited England again for the Test series of 1907. During this tour sections of the British press invoked the stereotypical imagery of rural village cricket where the farmer, blacksmith and squire all harmoniously indulged themselves in a game during a long summer day. Kotzé was seen to fit this scenario perfectly; given his rural background he was described as taking “life ‘calmly and deliberately’”, despite his fearsome qualities as a bowler. Kotzé, moreover, also became a symbol of wider import: his presence in the team was taken as evidence that Afrikaners had taken to British cultural ways and was a tribute to successful anglicisation..¹¹ Sporting identity could clearly be manipulated to serve the discourse of the day.

Rugby, equally, though with a different slant served a similar purpose. The first, and highly successful, Springbok rugby tour of the United Kingdom in 1906, under the captaincy of Paul Roos, was acclaimed as a major venture in nation-building, with Afrikaners being accepted on part with their British counterparts. Cricket, initially, was assigned a noticeably modified role by the game’s leaders, who represented this particular sport as “the Empire’s game”, played primarily by those of British stock on their own terms where someone like “Boerjong” Kotze could only appear in the guise of a successfully assimilated Englishman. The primary symbolic political object of tours between South Africa and England was to help integrate post-war South Africa into the British Empire, and to reassure the “mother country” that South Africa was now safely British. In 1909, on South African initiative, the Imperial Cricket Conference was founded, which firmly and officially tied the game even closer to the imperial project. “Subsequently”, it has been argued, “the Boers did not feel either welcome or inclined to participate in the game, which remained very much an expression of Anglo-Saxon separateness and superiority in the eyes of Afrikaner farming people.”¹²

For the greater part of the first half of the 20th century cricket amongst Afrikaners remained in the doldrums.¹³ For those who bought into cricket's symbolism it was a deplorable situation as a potential opportunity of establishing closer bonds between the two white groups through sport was being wasted. It occupied the mind of at least one dignitary, JH Hofmeyr, Administrator of the Transvaal in the late twenties who besides being a protégé of premier Jan Smuts was also a cricket fanatic. Cricket appealed to Hofmeyr's higher sensibilities: "it satisfied his moral sense, for here was a human activity, governed by the rule of law, competitive in nature, yet devoid of rapacity or fear or cruelty, and pleasurable to enjoy." Infused with such enthusiasms he was convinced of the power of cricket to draw men together. Accordingly he was instrumental in arranging school cricketing tours which had one of its aims to promote the game at certain Afrikaans schools.¹⁴ Greater white unity and a common interest in cricket were, however, distant chimera only destined to manifest themselves as reality several decades later. As late as 1951 there was among certain members of the Afrikaner elite an almost complete ignorance of the game. Thus the first post-1948 Afrikaner National Party premier, DF Malan, a rotund, bespectacled, former minister of religion to whom sport was decidedly otherworldly, told Dudley Nourse, the astonished captain of the South African cricket team which consisted of English speakers only, on the eve of their departure on a tour to England in 1951 that he hoped they had enjoyed their stay in South Africa.¹⁵

While the anti-cricket ideology of many Afrikaners can be understood at one level, it does, however, raise the question of why cricket was rejected but at the same time Afrikaners readily took to rugby which was also a British upper class import. This apparent paradox calls for some elucidation. While avoiding the trap of arguing that certain ethnic groups are genetically programmed for specific sports, it can be pointed out that rough and tumble contact sport like wrestling has since the days of the Boer republics been a popular pastime for young Afrikaners which could have acted as a bridging platform for making the transition

to a physical game like rugby.¹⁶ The nature of cricket can also have a bearing on the matter. Writing on immigrant sporting acculturation in Australia, academic authors have pointed out that “undoubtedly it is more difficult for immigrants to acquire complex cricket skills than it is to learn simpler football skills, especially if one is not brought up on the intricacies of cricket”.¹⁷ Similar comments have been made by another observer pertaining to Afrikaners: “Cricket is a game that takes a long time to learn, it is not like rugby or soccer which you can learn quite quickly. --- You have to start playing very young. Afrikaner schools did not promote it ---”¹⁸. These arguments may have their own validity, but cannot claim to provide a comprehensive explanation.

Cricket also needs to be situated in the wider socio-economic context. The first few decades of the 20th century were difficult ones for some Afrikaners as successive droughts and increasing commercialised farming forced many off the land and into the cities.¹⁹ It was a debilitating trek for many and the luxury of playing a relatively expensive game like cricket and belonging to an English club where most of the cricket was being played was not a realistic proposition for Afrikaners who had more pressing financial needs and less leisure time. Likewise, in the countryside the lack of facilities and competitive structures inhibited the spread of the game. It was in a comparative perspective a situation which closely and illuminatingly resembled similar circumstances in New Zealand where the Maori section of the population experienced the same kind of barriers which prevented a large scale entry into the game and which made it easier for them to turn to rugby as a sport of choice.²⁰

In addition one should consider the symbolic dynamics of a game like rugby. It has been argued elsewhere that

the nature of the game can be seen to appeal to the evolving self-image of nationalist Afrikaners during a period of accelerated growth of nationalism in

the 1930's and 1940's. Implicit in the game is a certain duality. On the one hand it can be considered as a collective sport of combat which emphasises rough masculinist traits of stamina, strength, speed and courage. Symbolically rugged aspects of the game could be easily equated with a resurgent and rampant Afrikaner nationalism. At the same time, despite being a rough affair, it was considered a gentleman's game and an excellent way of inculcating moral discipline. These ambiguous qualities associated with rugby fitted in well with the psychological and ideological needs of nationalist Afrikaners at a specific historical juncture.²¹

Having said that, the situation was not static. Although rugby's position as the premier Afrikaner sporting code was not to be seriously challenged, in the ensuing decades as the political and economic landscape changed, Afrikaner interest in sport was set to broaden out.

Embracing the game

Concomitant with the historic National Party victory of 1948 was an incremental

Afrikaner rapprochement with British cultural manifestations. While Afrikaner cultural interests still occupied pride of place, the acquisition of power meant that sufficient confidence prevailed for the opening up of spaces to explore areas of leisure pursuit which hitherto had at best only elicited lukewarm responses. Moreover, power also required the assertion of Afrikanerhood in areas where it was previously absent.

Hence, in language reminiscent of current black demands that sporting teams should reflect the composition of the “nation”, it was argued in 1956 in Afrikaner circles that “until the Afrikaner takes his place on our cricket fields no Springbok team can be said to be truly representative of our country’s cricketing ability.” Yet this quest was not formulated in terms of present day transformational charters, but a different route was suggested. Emerging Afrikaner interest had to be channelled into the “establishment of Afrikaans clubs, or rather clubs where the atmosphere is Afrikaans so that the newcomer will readily feel at home and will be able to concentrate all his endeavours on the mastery of the game itself.”²² The need for such an Afrikaans cricketing environment stemmed from antipathy towards what was regarded as snobbish English speaking clubs where Afrikaners were often deemed to be marginalised.²³ What was ideally required, was an opportunity for “Piet van der Merwe and Jan Burger to learn the game” in an enabling context.²⁴ Given such stepping stones, the assumption was that eventually Afrikaner cricketers would be able to hold their own a national level.

Although some predominantly Afrikaner clubs were formed, in a broader context Afrikaner interest in the game benefited from socio-economic and attendant cultural changes which permeated white society during the 1960’s. With an average growth rate of 6% during most of the decade, South Africa experienced a period of unprecedented prosperity. In tandem with this there was a trend among Afrikaners away from unskilled or semi-skilled relatively poorly paid labour to skilled and better remunerated positions with stable career prospects in the burgeoning nationalist bureaucracy and other associated enterprises. In addition, the business world saw greater collaboration between English companies and rapidly emerging Afrikaner concerns along with a general realignment of the ownership of the urban economy. While Afrikaners still lagged behind English speakers in terms of total income (45% against 55%), overall they made significant strides in the 1960’s. These developments brought in its train a set of gradually unfolding cultural correlates, reflected for example in the greater acquisition

of material goods such as expensive cars, architecturally designed houses and also as a new marker of status, overseas tours.²⁵

Along with lifestyle changes facilitated by increased wealth, recreational patterns showed greater differentiation and there was a deliberate attempt to master new kinds of sport. Golf was one sporting code which increasingly attracted Afrikaner players and at the same time Afrikaner interest in cricket showed a steady upward curve. Between 1955 and 1970 the number of white cricketers, many of them from Afrikaans homes, more than doubled.²⁶ This was underpinned by the emergence of a slowly convergent and more homogenous Afrikaans- and English-speaking youth culture. “White children increasingly began to share the same middle-class interests”, it has been observed, “pop music, shopping mall fashions and games, including cricket.”²⁷ Moreover, there was a significant growth in the number of educational institutions during this period. The number of white school teachers, many of them Afrikaners, grew by 34.6% between 1960 and 1972.²⁸ Such an expansion of the educational field held in turn the potential for exploring variegated ways of self-expression by overseeing the introduction of new sporting codes at school level.

In 1975 it was possible to report that during “the last ten years the Afrikaner’s involvement in the game has increased rapidly. Afrikaans schools where the word cricket has sometimes hardly been heard started organizing and playing the game.”²⁹ Greater financial resources available to schools in the wake of the 1960’s also aided the process as more schools were able to afford expensive equipment and the upkeep of the grounds.³⁰

While the game in general gained more popular appeal, it was left mainly to more established and elitist schools with a traditionally strong sporting ethos to come into their own and catapult a number of Afrikaans players onto the provincial and national scene. The name of Grey College in Bloemfontein stands out in this regard. Grey, a leading school in the Free

State, was established in 1855 and attracted the sons of elite Afrikaners in the province. It was a bilingual school with a fair amount of cross-cultural fertilisation between English and Afrikaans speakers³¹. For Afrikaners with a talent for ball games it was an ideal environment to be exposed to sports other than rugby and with dedicated teachers who in the 1960's had a particular interest in cricket and somewhat later the introduction of professional coaches the foundation was laid for the emergence of new talent. Corrie van Zyl, a national player explained the connection bluntly: "I started playing cricket because of Grey".³²

Others elevated the connection to an even higher level. Two gifted Afrikaans players, Kepler Wessels and Hansie Cronje, both destined to become South African captains, were illustrious sons of Grey College who bestowed on the school a special aura in the South African cricketing world and helped to foster a closer identification of Afrikaners with the game.³³ Almost equally so, Allan Donald, though not from Grey College, was despite his surname an Afrikaans speaker from lower middle class Bloemfontein whose exploits as a lightning fast bowler in the 1990's bequeathed him legendary status.³⁴ In the decades from the 1970's onwards Afrikaans speakers started to be chosen more frequently for the provincial Free State Nuffield team, the tournament which showcased South African schoolboy cricket. Moreover, some Grey College cricketers not only performed well during the tournament but also so impressed with their leadership skills that increasingly they were appointed as captains of the South African schools Nuffield team.³⁵ Grey's success spilled over into senior cricket and in 1995 the entire Free State senior provincial team was Afrikaans speaking.³⁶ The province also became a force to be reckoned with. In the late 1980's a previously lacklustre Free State team was transformed by an increasing number of Afrikaans speaking Old Greys. "The fresh young men, brains washed clean, bodies hardened in the Grey ethos, started to turn Free State around", it was claimed.³⁷

Grey College might have nurtured a special relationship between Afrikaners and cricket, but there were similar, if less concentrated developments in other places. Gradually players from several Afrikaans schools elsewhere in the country started making an impact in senior cricket; for example, to name a few, Nantie Hayward from Eastern Province, Albie Morkel and Andre Nel from the East Rand, Francois Herbst from Gauteng, Arno Jacobs from North West Province, Tertius Bosch and Fanie de Villiers from Pretoria all came into prominence from the 1990's onwards.³⁸

Indicators of an increased Afrikaner presence and skill in the higher echelons of the game had already become evident in the early 1970's as the social yeast of the 1960's started to foment in the form of a new generation of Afrikaners. In the Nuffield tournament of 1972 Afrikaans speakers constituted about 20% of the total number of players – a marked increase from earlier tournaments where the percentage of Afrikaans speakers was negligible. “Afrikaner boys”, it was reported at the time, “are currently busy making a name for themselves. --- The teams of Griquas and Northern Transvaal are now being captained by Afrikaners while the strength of a few other teams is in their Afrikaans players.”³⁹ Afrikaners also started to make their presence felt in other areas of the game. In the early 1980's Willie Basson of the then Northern Transvaal was the first Afrikaans speaker to be named administrator of the year for his role in making the province – described as the “ugly stepchild of the Currie Cup scene: the unwanted cinderella” - a more competitive force.⁴⁰

In assessing the reasons for the growth of cricket among Afrikaners it is useful to factor in that besides the socio- economic and cultural developments of the 1960's, political developments were propitious for greater integration of Afrikaans and white English speakers. South Africa's departure from the Commonwealth in 1961 and the establishment of a republic, although initially rued, had over time the effect of forging closer identification with Afrikaners as English speakers gradually came to terms with the irretrievable loss of former

imperial ties. Coupled with this realisation and also fearful of the winds of change which had started to blow in Africa, English speakers started to shift their allegiance away from the struggling United Party towards the National Party.⁴¹ Afrikaners for their part welcomed the move as it signalled new found parity between the two groups and opened the possibility for greater white cohesion. With these developments playing a British game no longer had the same kind of perceived negative association it might have had earlier. In 1970 a sport analyst was able to write: “The game is no longer an English game and therefore an alien institution: it is a South African game and now that the political connection with England has been severed, the Afrikaner can play cricket with a quiet conscience.”⁴²

What happened on the field was also of considerable importance. In 1966/67 South Africa won an epic series against Australia which sparked off a general sense of sport euphoria and triumphalism. It was a most ebullient team, brimful with confidence and talent and singularly expressive in its cricketing ways.⁴³ Its prowess captured the imagination and its enthusiastic pursuit of victory contagious. Thus an Afrikaner reporter reflected in 1975: “Like everybody else, we like winning. We are proud of the successes of our national teams. So when the Springboks emerged as a world power in cricket in the early years of the previous decade, the Afrikaners were very much behind them. That was where support of the game really started.”⁴⁴ Cricket books started to appear in Afrikaans and in one such book, Peter van der Merwe, an Anglo-Afrikaner and the victorious captain against the Australians, prefaced the book by saying that “there has never before been such an interest in cricket among Afrikaans speakers as is the case currently. As a player it has been clear to me from the numerous telegrams I have received from [Afrikaans] enthusiasts over the whole of the country”.⁴⁵ Other players concurred. Ali Bacher, Springbok captain in 1970 and destined to become a prominent cricket administrator recalled: “What was very significant to me was that, for the first time, thousands of Afrikaners came to watch cricket and show their support. This continued throughout the test series when Afrikaans folk became very committed cricket fans.

I believe they were attracted by our success.”⁴⁶ In like vein Peter Pollock, a fast bowler and one of the heroes of the 1960’s predicted that the Afrikaner’s enthusiasm for cricket would come into good stead in the future, explaining that “such is his temperament and personality that in years to come he will become an even more faithful patron than his less volatile English counterpart”⁴⁷.

The Afrikaans press reported widely on the cricketing feats of the national team. On a symbolic level it appeared that Afrikaans speakers had laid equal claim to these victories as part of the achievements of a new white republican nation. Along with economic prosperity, political dominance and the initial illusion that apartheid provided the answer to South Africa’s racial issues, Afrikaners now had the self-confidence to regard themselves on par with English speakers and this realisation extended to the cricket field where successes in the sporting arena ensured wider traction, providing the opportunity of showcasing and appropriating sporting talents to demonstrate the fruits of National Party rule. In addition, with the looming prospect of international isolation as anti-apartheid forces gathered strength abroad, sporting prowess was a way to keep South Africa prominently before the eyes of those who might be considered potential allies.⁴⁸

Looking at the diffusion and non-diffusion of cricket in a global context, American sociologists, Jason Kaufman and Orlando Patterson, have isolated a number of factors which under certain conditions can facilitate or retard the adoption of the game where there was a significant British presence. Probably because of a lack of detailed research on Southern Africa the area is dismissed in a rather cursory fashion. Nevertheless, on a level of general abstraction for the other areas they have investigated, they came to the conclusion that of the multiple factors that can play a role, “it is social stratification that lies most fundamentally at the heart of the matter. The extent to which an elite cultural practice like cricket was shared with or shielded from the general population was a direct result of the elites’ own sense of

their place atop the social hierarchy.”⁴⁹ In response to this one can refine the argument in the sense that the English speaking elites in South Africa during the 1960’s as a result of societal shifts sought to align themselves more closely with the new Afrikaner rulers and as a spin-off cricket broadened to become a more generally accepted sport incorporating both groups as opposed to the preserve of mainly white English speakers. Such a structural approach to the issue has the salutary effect that essentialisms about the acquisition of a sporting culture can at least be moderated if not totally discarded. The sport historian, André Odendaal, has argued the trajectory of an Afrikaner entry into the game succinctly: “Afrikaners did not get their place in the sun in cricket because they practised hard for fifty years and eventually acquired a cricket ‘culture’. It was political power, increasing wealth and greater social opportunities and confidence that broadened the base and paved the way ---.”⁵⁰

While Afrikaners started making inroads on several levels, it did not imply that all underlying English/Afrikaner animosities evaporated overnight. In the 1960’s Afrikaners were still invisible in the national team. It was the “Englishness” of the game that caused Prime Minister BJ Vorster to quip when told what the English batting score between England and South Africa was: “Their English or our

English?”⁵¹ On the field Afrikaners were at times riled by ethnic jibes from English speakers; some might have been good natured, others not. Albert Morkel who played in the Transvaal premier league during the 1970’s recounts how he was treated by some fellow team members: “I used to play for Old Johannians [the club associated with the elite South African private school St Johns College] with players like Don Mackay-Coghill. He always used to joke that I was’nt part of the team. They only brought me along so that I could make the braai after the game. We were called everything during those days, rock-spiders, hairy-backs, you name it.”⁵² Kepler Wessels, known for his intensity, was adamant on the kind of treatment he received during his first few years of provincial cricket. He recalled that many players

“thought I was a stupid Dutchman from the Free State. They can say what they like now but that’s how it was. There is no doubt that that Afrikaans-speaking guys were not regarded that highly.”⁵³ These were not isolated incidents and several such observations found their way into the press⁵⁴. In time though as players mingled to a greater extent and along with broader shifts in South African society as the country lurched towards full democracy, petty white ethnic rivalries receded in the face of larger issues.

Emerging on the international scene: Kepler Wessels, Hansie Cronje and the question of representational Afrikaner identity

One of the issues which emerged in the early 1970’s was the international sporting boycott of South African cricket teams and which was destined to span just over two decades. The boycott was instituted in an effort to exert pressure on the South African apartheid government to bring about substantial political change in the country. Within ten years the movement gained momentum and despite a variety of attempts by the state to stem the tide, South African cricketers were for all intents and purposes stranded as far as official international cricket was concerned.⁵⁵ The relative significance of the boycott in the overall political dismantling of apartheid still remains a moot point, but on the cricket pitch, it has been argued, admittedly conjecturally, that a fair number of promising Afrikaans cricketers were deprived of the opportunity to represent their country.⁵⁶

It was not a prospect which appealed to Kepler Wessels. As a young Afrikaner from Bloemfontein he had from an early age become used to extending himself in a game which Afrikaners had only recently taken an interest in and which been dominated by English customs and traditions for a considerable period. He was intent on furthering his quest and that meant that he had to play international cricket in order to compete against the best. After

a spell of playing county cricket in England, he moved to Australia, obtained citizenship and was chosen to represent his adopted country in 1982, scoring 162 runs on debut and carried on to represent Australia for 24 official Tests and 59 one day internationals. Later in the 1980's he also played in the rebel Australian tour to South Africa, designed to circumvent the boycott. In 1986 he returned to the country. To crown his extraordinary career, once the epochal political changes of the early 1990's allowed South Africa's re-admission to the international fold, he was captain of the national team at the World Cup of 1992.⁵⁷

Wessels was a driven professional and determined to rise above what he considered the politics that impacted on his game of choice. To some extent he was an early example of the trend in commercial cricket of players plying their trade irrespective of the ties to countries in which they were born. Hilary Beckles the West Indian scholar, commented on this in 2004:

Today's cricket hero --- now wishes to be identified as a professional craftsman with only a secondary responsibility to the wider socio-political agenda carried out by his predecessors ---. He sees himself as an apolitical, transnational, global professional aiming to maximise financial earnings within an attractive market, and is principally motivated and guided by these considerations ---.⁵⁸

Yet, for all of this Wessels was unable to escape being ethnically tagged in his career. He was despite the fact that he played for Australia, originally from Afrikaner stock and, moreover, the first Afrikaner to reach such exalted heights as to represent a country other than his own on the cricket field. The interconnectedness between sport, society and politics meant that his feats on the cricket field could not be separated out from the wider politics that swirled around him.

His biographer, Edward Griffiths wrote in glowing terms about his achievement to be selected for Australia, not refraining from injecting an ethnic element:

Of all the South African cricketers who had been led into isolation by the politics of their government, only one man had shown the will and strength to get up and do something about it, emigrate to a country where he had no ties, wait through the period of qualification and earn a place in the Test team. They had said he was mad, but now he had done it. The loneliness, the sadness of leaving his home: it had all paid off. He had won. Just as he had been taught as a young Afrikaner in the Free State, he had not shrunk from the massive task, and he had seen it through.⁵⁹

Not everybody was that impressed. Malcolm Fraser, the Australian prime minister who was all in favour of the boycott of the South African sport boycott, deliberately snubbed him at a ceremony in honour of new Australian team members.⁶⁰ Sections of the press also homed in on his background. He was regarded as “an implausible Australian” and moreover: “He is an Afrikaner, and a remote and sullen seeming one.”⁶¹ While he was fully accepted by his team members in his career of eight years in Australia, at times some cricket supporters sorely tested his patience, despite the fact that he usually excelled on the field, by calling him a “weak South African bastard” who should “bugger off” to where he came from.⁶² Besides some friction which developed between him and the Australian Cricket Board on issues of payment, his return was also prompted by what he considered insulting spectator behaviour. He claimed in 1986: “Whenever I went out to bat or play at any ground, I always got some abuse referring to my country of birth. I have been playing in Australia, doing my best and I

don't think I should have to put up with that.”⁶³ Once in South Africa and after the country's re-admission to international cricket, Wessels' selection as captain of the World Cup squad of 1992 sparked off its own round of ethnic comments. The wheel, so it seems, had come full circle as it was reported: “For much of his career as an Afrikaner in an Englishman's game, as a South African in an Australian dressing room – he has had to stand alone. Now, at the end of a long and difficult road, he will have the support of a nation.”⁶⁴

What is of interest here is the variety of ways and the durability of the notion of “Afrikaner” as it unfolded in the context of the unfolding Wessels saga. Despite the many twists and turns of Wessels' career, his exploits in the international cricketing arena and the fact that he understandably preferred to keep a low political profile, the notion of him as an Afrikaner remained constant. Although the reasons for and the intentions of the usage might have differed, it was the case as much in Australia as in South Africa. In his mother country it was considered “sad to see an Afrikaans speaking guy ‘forsaking’ the land of his birth when so few Afrikaners had made it to the top in cricket”.⁶⁵ In the volatile and politically charged atmosphere of South Africa in the 1980's the term of “Afrikaner” could not be uncoupled from wider politics. It seemed to be an inescapable situation. Referring to controversies surrounding Wessels, it was reported in the Afrikaans press that though one could change one's nationality, one could not alter one's identity.⁶⁶ While the Afrikaans reportage on Wessels was sympathetic, academic analysts, even though making the same point adopted a more critical stance, questioning Wessels' subversion of the sporting boycott and concluded that his “brief stint as an ‘Australian’ represented only a hiatus enforced by the international ban on competition with the apartheid state; Wessels' true national status was as valid in an apartheid South Africa as it was in a post-apartheid society.”⁶⁷

In what seems like a strange irony, Wessels' successor as South African captain, fellow Grey College old boy, Hansie Cronje's, and career was even more controversial, albeit for a different set of reasons. In a changed context, the notion of "Afrikaner" nevertheless once again emerged to serve a variety of discursive and explanatory functions.

When Cronje was chosen to lead South Africa in 1994 he was the second youngest captain in the country's cricketing history to do so. He was destined to embark on an outstanding career with 68 Tests and 188 one day internationals, and was described as "one of the most astute captains in the game, and South Africa's most successful."⁶⁸ Cronje was deemed a charismatic figure that captured the public's imagination. He held out the hopes of a sporting nation which had just recently emerged from the woes of apartheid and isolation to become a symbol of what South Africa was capable of in a new era. Reflecting on the immediate post-apartheid period a sport journalist commented on the dynamics at work:

This positive investment in the future by all of cricket's many constituencies, found a natural emotional locus in Cronje and his successful Test and one-day side. There might have been an element of fantasy and willed delusion in South African's adoration of their national captain ---- but the national side remained a team worth following, a team which contained a part of us – however small. ⁶⁹

All of this was to be overshadowed though in 2000 with startling revelations that Cronje was implicated in and had benefited financially from shady bookmaking deals relating to match fixing. Subsequent to a commission of inquiry the disgraced captain was banished from the cricketing world. Not long afterwards, in a pilot error of judgement, Cronje met his ultimate and tragic fate when he died in 2002 in an air crash close to George in the southern Cape.

In the projection of the Cronje saga and the discourse which enveloped Cronje, his ethnic background became a significant strand. On one level, before his fall, he was seen as the embodiment of white nationhood, fully merging different sections in what used to be a game dominated by white South African Anglo-Saxons. Reflecting on what Cronje had represented before his fall from grace, a journalist commented in April 2000: “Cronje – unusually for a Test cricketer, let alone a captain – is an Afrikaner. In his unflinching --- person, he thus symbolised the coming together of Afrikaans and English-speaking whites after a century of conflict.” His cricketing exploits had a wider reach and represented what was considered the best of two worlds: “a flinty Afrikaner who behaved like an honourable Englishman.”⁷⁰

Special pride of place though was reserved for Cronje in Afrikaner ranks. He came into prominence precisely at a point when Afrikaners had all but ceded complete political power to the African National Congress; in the absence of political heroes the world of sport had opened up for a new set of icons to fill the void. ”Nowadays”, it was said in 2000, “South Africa only has sporting heroes as the ANC erased the rest of the “volk’ through all kinds of chicanery. Therefore it is a double blow for those who had regarded Hansie Cronje as a hero – they now have no other heroic figures!”⁷¹

Cronje's cricketering feats seemed to fit the bill perfectly for a refashioned Afrikaner symbol of derring-do in the brave new and increasingly globalised post-apartheid world. Coming from the heartland of the Free State which was often viewed as somewhat of a backwater, he could do his people proud by adding new international dimensions to their world views. He was "Afrikanerdom's golden boy."⁷² The qualities ascribed to him and his emblematic significance assumed larger than life proportions. He was

a man of his times, a cosmopolitan, dashing figure, whose toughness was respected by men and whose appearance was admired by women ---. He was rich, sexy, uncompromising and successful. --- He reassured a tribe that the world had not come to an end. He expressed the yearning of his folk. --- Till his story was contaminated, Cronje seemed like a colossus amidst a compromised people. He was a hero in uncertain times. A religion had abandoned its most basic tenets, a strong nation has been forced from its enclave, the pillars upon which life had rested for generations had been shattered. And there, upon the field, was a remote and unyielding figure, a conquering son reminding all and sundry that the possibilities of life endured. And then came the fall. And a terrible fall it was. Afrikaners, especially were stunned".⁷³

The tidings of Cronje's wrongdoings were initially met with disbelief; the shock, one journalist claimed, was on par with the dismayed responses 34 years ago when it was solemnly announced that Dr Hendrik Verwoerd, for many whites the powerful and revered prime minister of the Afrikaner National Party government, had been murdered in parliament in 1966.⁷⁴

Besides the way in which Cronje's demise was constructed in Afrikaner consciousness, his background from an Afrikaner home in the Free State also provided food for speculation as to his commitment to what was perceived as the ethos of the game. In English-speaking journalistic circles it was a topic of discussion whether Cronje as an Afrikaner had fully imbibed what they regarded as cricket's sporting traditions. The argument put forward tentatively was :

that the further cricket had been disseminated from its English roots, the further certain aspects of the game had been devalued. The spiritual and ethical dimension of the game, the paraphernalia of 'it's just not cricket' did not seem to be that important in Afrikaans cricket-playing circles --- and young Afrikaans cricketers seem to treat it more - or - less mechanically, as a sport which had a host of techniques that need to be mastered in order to attain competence and progress through the ranks.⁷⁵

Although the assertion can be summarily dismissed on the grounds that it traded on a range of mythological stereotypes about cricket and Afrikaners, the way in which Afrikanerness was invoked is nevertheless revealing. Cronje, like Wessels before him, could not be judged as a cricketer *per se*. His errant behaviour had to be linked to the fact that he was an Afrikaner and that seemed to provide a possible explanatory key to his behaviour.

In similar vein Cronje's upbringing in the Free State was brought to bear on the matter, especially his extensive dealings with Indian bookmakers and his condescending attitude towards the young Indian female investigator, Shamila Batoyi, who interrogated him during the commission of inquiry. Under apartheid the Free State had long prohibited Indians from settling in the province. Growing up in such an environment , it was argued, that he had no previous experience of Indians and was therefore out of his depth and unsure how to deal with

them.⁷⁶ This argument pitted the stereotype of the God-fearing Afrikaner against the devious orientals.⁷⁷ The reflexive response as an academic author has explained, was that the

heroic, patriotic, Christian athletes like Cronje could never be guilty of such chicanery and Indian investigators were incompetent and malicious. When it became impossible to evade the fact that Cronje was in fact guilty, blame was subtly shifted away from the Indian investigators and athletes towards what might be described as the Indian milieu. ‘We all know that these things happen on the subcontinent’ became a common refrain, implying that it was the innate immorality of the subcontinent that had ensnared, seduced, and corrupted an erstwhile icon of white moral purity.⁷⁸

Such typecasting on both sides did not facilitate a deeper understanding of the reasons behind Cronje’s avarice and the general phenomenon of match fixing, but it did show how easily recourse was taken to presumed ethnic qualities.

The discourses spawned by Cronje’s inglorious departure from cricket and their focus on the ethnic dimension as embodied by the portrayal of Cronje as an exceptional Afrikaner, require further attention. It is helpful to view this as a case of exaggerated identification. The mantle of overrepresentation was draped around Cronje in the sense that he had become the heroic cricketer who in unsettled times symbolically shouldered the burden and aspirations of the whole of the Afrikaner community in search of someone like him.⁷⁹ This had the effect of obscuring more than it revealed. The Cronje that was constructed by his community did not necessarily bear a close resemblance to the actual man and cricketer Cronje. The man in question, though he did not turn his back on his home language, had largely refrained from casting himself as an Afrikaner and did not self-consciously generate the qualities attributed to him. In this respect, as one observer soberly noted, he carried “no discernible baggage”.⁸⁰

He was a professional cricketer who sought the highest financial returns, legitimate or otherwise, for his skills, sporting insight and knowledge. The adulation from the community that appropriated him and the fact that Afrikaners had established a profile in a game which they were largely absent earlier on was accepted as a lower-order given; he craved much more than gratifying ethnic ties and affirmation.

Conclusion

The trajectory of diffusion of cricket among Afrikaners correlated closely with their ascendancy to power in 1948 and subsequent economic advancement especially during the 1960's. Although these considerations were of paramount underlying importance, other considerations such as the success of the national team in the mid-1960's also contributed to greater press coverage and wider interest. This, however, did not imply that Afrikaners made cricket their own in the same visceral way in which they embraced rugby. Cricket though enthusiastically supported, lacked the feverish intensity of the appeal of rugby. The general imagery of Afrikaner's relationship with cricket is more disjointed; an overall pattern of involvement can be readily discerned but the levels of symbolic symbiosis and emblematic investment of meaning are more muted.

As discussed two outstanding cricketers to emerge from an Afrikaans background were Kepler Wessels and Hansie Cronje. For different reasons their controversial careers gave rise to a set of discourses in which ethnic affiliation loomed large and in which identities were assigned which did not necessarily accord with their aspirations as professional cricketers. The historian Bill Nasson has recently encouraged members of the guild to "consider sport's historical meaning through a wider range of registers, taking the measure of its eternal virtues of triumph, honour and heroism as well as its ignominy and disgrace. And which also gets to grips with what it is to be a big hit, not merely on the field, but off it, too."⁸¹ One way of

doing this will be to take note of the way in which sporting identities, as alluded to in this essay, have been refracted and constructed through particular discourses.

Afrikaner involvement in cricket had come a long way from the days of JJ “Boerjong” Kotzé to the dishonourable exit of Hansie Cronje. Nevertheless throughout the period, despite changing circumstances and whether fully justified or not, a sense of Afrikaner identity was invoked for a variety of purposes to serve as an explanatory device. In a way it is understandable precisely because of the packaging of sport where ethnic groups and nations are as a matter of course consistently pitted against each other. The very nature of sport makes for the replication and subdivision of identities.

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